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ABSTRACT

Reviews of the Nelson-Denny Reading Test (N-D) for college students indicate that the test may not be appropriate for all college students. Although the N-D is easy to administer and score, some of its traits make it questionable for use in evaluating open admissions students: it is timed; it measures vocabulary, rate, and comprehension in a mere 35 minutes, using 100 vocabulary questions and only 36 comprehension questions; the language is awkward; the length of the passages does not vary significantly; no purposes are provided for the readings; in some cases, the questions can be answered without reading the required passages; it lacks differentiation in reading skills; and passages have wide ranges of readability levels, varying from tenth grade to beyond the college level. Instead of using a single test like the N-D, a collection of measures should be used to assess the people and programs involved in college reading instruction. Such a collection would include diagnostic instruments, criterion referenced tests, cloze exercises, teacher checklists, informal reading inventories, word lists, and skill inventories. Any testing program that includes less data must be aimed more at simply using test scores for records than at determining information that will aid in the instruction of students. (RL)

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The Nelson-Denny Test in College Reading Programs

One widely used instrument in reading evaluation for students and programs at the college level is The Nelson-Denny Reading Test. This discussion will review the Nelson-Denny in terms of its appropriateness for college-level problem readers, particularly those admitted through open-door policies. The N-D is used throughout the country in high schools and colleges, and several factors make it quite popular. It is easy and quick to administer (thirty-five minutes total test time), and it can be scored rapidly by machine or by hand. The test booklets are also reusable since answer sheets are available. According to David Orr (1965), the tests of vocabulary and rate are quite reliable (.92-.93), but the comprehension reliability is lower (.81).

Since the test is characterized by all these positive points. why should it be singled out for this discussion? Many standardized tests exhibit these same characteristics. Initially, two factors must be considered. One is that the test is too long for the allowed time limits, and the second is the number of items included in the total test. Both areas will be discussed here.

Several facets of the time limits problem should be reviewed. The fact that the N-D measures vocabulary, rate and comprehension in a mere thirty-five minutes must be questioned. It this the best way to measure reading achievement for college students with

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reading problems? There are 100 vocabulary questions and 36 comprehension questions to answer. This is a large number of items to be completed in a short amount of time, and it is frustrating for students before they even try the test. They are often flabbergasted by merely looking at the required material and hearing the test directions and the time limits.

There is also a very high likelihood that if these students have taken reading classes, they have been taught to adjust their reading rates according to their purpose for reading and according to the material under consideration. Yet, when the N-D is used, they are evaluated by a highly timed test that demands an extremely rapid rate of reading for the entire test. This is logical, since the instrument was also designed to detect the top readers in the student population. Furthermore, poor readers are often very aware that they need more time to study and read than the "average" students, and many are eager and willing to give the extra time. Why then penalize them for not being "speed demons" at taking a test that is often used to determine if they pass a reading course or "exit" from a remedial class? Do they really need to be subjected to a timed test at all?

An answer to the latter question, of course, depends upon the purpose for testing. If the reason for giving the test is for a comparison of one particular group to the population on which the norms of this instrument were established, then the time limits would have to be followed. The same reasoning would

apply if the results were being used to compare students from different colleges or as the pre- and posttest measures of a particular study. However, if the purpose for testing is to arrive at helpful teaching information, a timed test need not be given at all. As Roger Farr (1969) has stated in his book Reading: What Can Be Measured?, a review of the research on reading comprehension indicated that it is probably better to use untimed tests with various types of questions stated in language similar to the language patterns of the students. He adds that the tests should contain passages of varied lengths on different topics. According to counts by this researcher, Form A of the Nelson-Denny contains all passages of essentially the same length, except for the first longer passage used to measure rate. (see Chart A below).

Farr also contends that students should be allowed to look back on some selections (a characteristic that will eliminate a test of total recall) and should be given specific purposes for reading. These conditions would certainly be more like the normal reading-studying situations of college students. They would also make the testing procedure much more humanistic (defined by this writer as teaching with as much empathy and understanding as

Chart A

Length of Passages
Form A, Nelson-Denny

Passage	No. of words	No. of sentences
II	200	18
III	199	19
IV	200	19
V	206*	19
VI	200	17
VII	199	19
VIII	201	18

*Four numerals counted as words

possible), producing what should be the ultimate goal of testing--providing data to help teach the student. Problem readers at the college level often see their major reading problem as reading too slowly, and one must ask whether or not an alternate type of test would not be a better measure. Perhaps a criterion-referenced test, a diagnostic test or an instrument with greater time limits designed for students with limited reading abilities would be more suitable.

A second consideration must be the fact that the N-D measures three factors--vocabulary, rate and comprehension--in a total of 136 questions. An overloading of vocabulary questions (100) and only 36 comprehension items are used to determine the reading ability of a college student. The validity of such an instrument must be questioned. Can 36 items be a true measure of the reading comprehension abilities of students at this level? Can 100 vocabulary questions given with little context in such limited time (10 minutes) be a fair measure of a student's reading-meaning vocabulary? It is a widely accepted fact that adults use context to determine the meaning and pronunciation of words more than other means. However, this test is evaluating a student with little aid from the context of a passage. Furthermore, information on the validity of the test is not well publicized, and Orr (1965) has also criticized the test manual for not providing adequate data on predictive and concurrent validity.

Others have challenged the N-D for many of the same reasons pointed out here. Fred Pyrczak, California State University, Los Angeles, published a study in 1972 in which he sought to determine

the extent to which correct answers to reading comprehension questions might be given without ever reading the passages on which the questions were based. He used the N-D in his research and found that numerous students could answer many of the questions correctly withour ever seeing the passages, often by using information given in other questions. Orr (1965) has noted that many of the comprehension passages on the test are characterized by long, awkward sentences. Such material might be helpful in separating sophisticated readers from problem readers, but the latter students--as well as their instructors--already know that such passages are confusing and frustrating for them.

Several other questionable points have also been noted by Agatha Townsend (1965). She points out that the test is intended for college-bound high school students and college English classes and that trouble results when the test is used with other groups, which would include open-admissions college students. She concludes that the test does not differentiate the reading skills of college students, particularly since the test manual does not mention any control of the readability levels of the passages. In fact, nothing is reported on readability. Students who score well may do so on selections of widely divergent reading levels.

According to this author's calculations, computed according to the Gunning Readability Formula, the readability levels of the Form B comprehension paragraphs vary considerably (see Chart B below).

Chart B

Readability Levels

Form B, Nelson-Denny

Passage	Fog Index	Index Comparison
I	10.50	High School
II	12.24	High School+
III	14.13	College
IV	19.70	College +
V	8.33	Eighth grade
VI	15.50	College
VII	14.13	College
VIII	21.33	College

This survey indicates that the range of passages is from eighth grade level through the post-college level; certainly not what one would expect college-level problem readers to be able to read successfully.

Findings such as those above must make one question the use of the test with students who have histories of difficulty in reading, while an examination of the data yielded by the N-D scores further reinforces a lack of differentiation in reading skills. Subtest scores for vocabulary, rate and comprehension are the only information obtained. There is no item analysis or skills analysis; the student or his instructor have no specific prescriptive teaching information after the testing is completed. Certainly, at least three alternatives exist--the use of criterion-referenced tests that would indicate those skills the student has mastered and those he has not or diagnostic tests with a larger number of subtests or standardized tests aimed at lower achieving students. All of these would provide more instructional help.

Perhaps the question of whether or not the N-D is the best test for assessment of problem readers at the college level goes back to the points raised by Foger Farr and referred to earlier. The N-D has few of the characteristics that he feels necessary for fair evaluation. It is timed; the language is awkward; the length of the passages does not vary significantly; and no purposes are provided for reading. Students can look back on the selections, thus eliminating total recall, but the time limits are not sufficient to make such a process very feasible.

Therefore, as this review has indicated, the N-D may not be an appropriate test for all college students, particularly poor readers in

open-admissions institutions. It is a well-known test that is easy and quick to administer and score. However, many of its traits make it questionable for use in the evaluation of open-admissions college readers. Perhaps another of Farr's points is the key to the dilemma of using the N-D or any other single standardized test. He states emphatically that

> ...if one seeks to get an accurate assessment of student achievement, it is advisable to use a wide variety of reading measures including informal inventories, standardized tests, teacher observations and teacher assessment of performance in content areas.

The Nelson-Denny Reading Test - or any other single test - may provide some useful information in college reading evaluation, but it should not be the total measure. Other tests and other types of evaluation, such as diagnostic instruments, criterion-referenced tests, cloze exercises, teacher checklists, informal reading inventories, word lists, and skills inventories, should be used to assess the people and the programs involved in college reading instruction. Any testing program that includes less data must be more aimed toward simply using test scores for records than in determining information that will aid in the instruction of students.

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